

## Introduction: Circulating Stuff through Second-hand, Vintage and Retro Markets

By Staffan Appelgren & Anna Bohlin

With modernity, the circulation of used objects through donation, selling, barter and gifting has tended to take place in the shadow of increasingly dominating forms of industrial commodity production and consumption. Progress-oriented consumer modernity in the 1950s and 1960s and deregulated global markets in the 1980s and 1990s created conditions for great leaps forward for a linear consumption practice that in Sweden was strikingly captured by the motto ‘buy, use and discard’ (Husz 2009; Löfgren 2012). Lately, however, the relatively unchallenged position of first cycle mass production and consumption has come under question, and throughout affluent countries in the Global North there is an emergent interest in various forms of circulation and reuse (Featherstone 2011). Across social fields, consumers are motivated to reduce, reuse and recycle, in order to manage precarity and lessen impact on the environment. Within this broader trend of circulation, trading trinkets, textiles, furniture and household items from days gone by have become a popular pastime as well as a significant industry (Gregson & Crewe 2003; Baker 2012; Norris 2012).



Jeans store, Gothenburg. A variation on the theme of reuse, reduce and recycle.

In Western Europe and North America the last decades have seen an unprecedented growth of the second-hand sector in the form of retro shops, vintage and antiques boutiques, flea markets as well as Internet barter and trade (Franklin 2011; Cassidy & Bennet 2012). Rather than primarily existing in the interstices and marginal spaces of consumer society (Gregson & Crewe 2003), second-hand practices have begun to move into the centre of consumption, both physically, in terms of urban space (Hetherington 2010; Palmsköld 2013); figuratively, in terms of their influence on mainstream consumption and cultural production (cf. Fredriksson 2013), and, as can be seen in the studies presented here, socially, in terms of being adopted and enjoyed by the broad middle classes. Within this commerce, the ideal of ‘newness’, commonly regarded as central to consumer culture, is side-stepped by an emphasis on values such as ‘originality’, ‘uniqueness’, ‘nostalgia’ and ‘authenticity’ (Fredriksson 1996; Gregson & Crewe 2003; Reynolds 2011). Serving as inspiration not just for a growing section of mainstream consumers, second-hand practices are increasingly influencing conventional industry, as seen in the proliferation of reproduced old designs and attempts to industrialize aging by creating patina in new commodities (Crewe, Gregson & Brooks 2003; Franklin 2011). A recent announcement from the Swedish Tax Agency, stating that the trade of second-hand goods should incur VAT, which it has so far been exempt from, is a reflection of the increasingly influential status of this commerce (Skatteverket 2014).

What, then, are the reasons for this boom? Explanations for the rapid development of second-hand markets have pointed to a range of factors, such as the playful reappraisal and aestheticization of the past as an inventory of styles for adorning homes and bodies (Franklin 2011; Cassidy & Bennett 2012); the growth and popularisation of environmental and ethical concerns (Franklin 2011; Lewis & Potter 2011; Fredriksson 2013); or recreational aspects of socializing with friends and hunting for unpredictable ‘finds’ (Crewe & Gregson 1998; Gregson & Crewe 2003; Guit & Roux 2010). Others have emphasised consumers’ need to keep up previous levels of consumption in the face of economic hardship (Williams & Paddock 2003).

The collection of articles in this thematic section<sup>1</sup> engage in different ways with these issues, exploring how everyday objects assume new lives through the rebranding of ‘stuff’ into vintage, retro or second-hand. That they focus on relatively wealthy countries in the Global North is no coincidence. The expansion of linear modes of consumption in affluent societies is dependent on ‘effective’ waste management systems, which with increased globalization has extended the conduits of disposal from the backyards to far away places across the globe. Discarded objects tend to travel downwards through social hierarchies, which has meant that locally, in affluent societies like Sweden, the market for reused objects have been associated with a certain social stigma, and that globally, poor countries in the Global South have increasingly become destinations for unwanted used

goods from the Global North. These global asymmetrical flows have included both objects that have ended up on second-hand markets (Tranberg Hansen 2000; Norris 2010; Brooks 2013) and discarded stuff that have fed the swelling waste mountains (Gregson et al. 2010; Alexander & Reno 2012). The well-established antique markets are a stark contrast to the mass disposal of unwanted stuff that end up in the Global South. Both deal with the circulation of used material culture, but within radically different regimes of knowledge and value production. Antique markets constitute a complex apparatus for establishing and raising aesthetic, economic and social value of certain used objects (Combs 2003). The topic at hand in this thematic issue, however, might best be located in the middle of these established forms of circulation. The scope of this emerging middle ground is wide, encompassing elements of economic necessity and trash being re-valued, on the one hand, and social status and strict provenance on the other. Its field is delineated through questions about how used stuff is being managed, valued and desired in and through circulation, and how that circulation creates socially embedded objects that potentially engage people aesthetically, morally, socially, economically and ecologically.

As an arena for circulation of used objects, second-hand markets do not necessarily follow conventional laws of commercial transaction. Rather than involving an autonomous and alienated commodity on the shelf in the store (cf. Tsing 2013), this type of exchange is grounded in things being historically, socially and narratively embedded. The different articles in this thematic section explore how such embeddedness is experienced at different stages during the circular movement of stuff; during moments of disposal and separation (Lovatt, Palmsköld), at encounters in flea markets or yard sales (Hansson & Brembeck, Debary) or in kitsch boutiques or upmarket furniture stores (Handberg), or when using or wearing sought after finds (Fischer).

The contributions show the capacity of everyday objects to evoke strong sentiments and thoughts of a peculiarly moral nature, and how normative, sensuous and affective aspects of social life are embedded in each other. Things that have outlived their owner, or their own cycle of utility, may evoke not only specific memories, or nostalgia for a given past (Handberg, Debary), but may also trigger an urge to 'do right'; to handle the items in an ethically and morally acceptable manner (Lovatt, Palmsköld). At moments of transition, when the object is about to be discarded, its entanglements are laid bare, so to speak, asserting themselves through placing limits on what is deemed acceptable ways of handling it (Debary). As noted above, these entanglements can reach back in time, such as the obligations of looking after an item that used to belong to a loved one, or reach forward, towards future generations, as when making sure something is recycled even though it has no personal meaning or value (Lovatt, Palmsköld, Appelgren & Bohlin). Even if not explicitly politicized, these contributions indicate the significance of a complex cluster of moral-affective rationalities that entail aspects of

what Denis Guiot and Dominique Roux refers to as a ‘critical’ dimension, involving distancing from the conventional market system, including ethical and environmental concerns with respect to recycling and anti-waste (2010: 368).

The circulation of objects in second-hand markets takes place in and through various stages of handling. Sorting processes form a crucial part in how the informants in Melanie Lovatt’s study deal with objects inherited when parents or relatives pass away. While most research on disposal as a phase of circulation of material culture concerns how people manage the surplus of their own stuff, Lovatt’s contribution explores strategies and affects in dealing with the stuff of other people in a British context. Her study makes clear that this is a particular situation energized by a dynamic between the affective and memorial dimensions of things embodying residuals of people that are near and dear and the impracticability of keeping it all. This sensitive situation calls for sensitive forms of handling and passing on objects carrying aspects of beloved persons in responsible ways. Lovatt shows how sorting through things meet multiple needs, both emotional and practical, and how charity shops can provide an expedient means for acting in a morally legitimate way when faced with the dilemma of neither wanting to keep or wanting to throw away.

The second-hand market is traversed by a wide range of circulating objects. One particular category is textiles and clothes. In Anneli Palmsköld’s contribution to this thematic issue we can follow the shift in attitude and practice beginning in the 1970s in the Swedish society, from mending and altering textiles out of necessity in order to make the most out of the lifespan of the items, to sorting and circulating through donations and passing on unused items. Palmsköld shows that while the practices have changed, there is an unaltered morality testifying to the value placed on textiles and clothes. For many people the pressure of fashion and speed of consumption today produces an overflow of clothes and textiles that are not yet worn out, but to resolve this by throwing away excess items is not considered an attractive option. Rather, the informants in Palmsköld’s study prefer to either downcycle textiles within the home, or to make use of the infrastructures of circulation being established by local charity organizations and second-hand shops. Continuous sorting processes at home determine what to be kept for different uses, what to be retained for nostalgic and memorial purposes and what to be passed on or donated. At the other end, sorting processes at charity organizations establish what will be available for purchase in their stores locally, what will be circulated through other conduits including being sent abroad, and what will end up in the incinerator plant. Caring for textiles over a period of forty years has transformed from mending and altering at home and across generations to making use of societal infrastructures of circulation locally, nationally and globally to ensure continued utilization.

Discussing the second-hand market in terms of classifications of objects that traverse it, such as books, furniture, textile, home electronics, etc., is one way of

approaching the phenomenon. Another is to map the various classifications of objects along lines of market and style related concepts such as second-hand, retro, vintage, kitsch, and so on. Fischer's work on the history of vintage in the United States traces the concept from its early usage, adopted from the wine industry in the 1950s, over a forty-year period of transformation. As in the case of Palmsköld's article, Fischer primarily focuses on clothes and shows how the concept of vintage follows the journey of second-hand from being associated with poverty and pity to becoming an arena for profit and position. She follows this development through an analysis of the uses of the concept in American newspaper and magazine articles published in this period, ending in the late 1980s when vintage is a well-established subset of the American second-hand clothing market. This development, the author shows, is interdependent with the changes within the conventional U.S. garment industry. Rather than opposing each other, the second-hand market and the first cycle market stand in a dynamic relationship to each other, from which authenticity, aura, quality, uniqueness and nostalgia emerge as desirable experiences for vintage shoppers.

Retro is another style etiquette on the second-hand market, sometimes overlapping with vintage, sometimes standing in contrast to it. In the article by Kristian Handberg retro culture is linked to the formation of identity, and in this particular case we are shown how retro objects furnish not only the homes in Montreal, but also the collective memory and the cultural identity of the city. Modernist furniture, a globally circulating style, becomes assets in negotiating the city's modern past in contrast to a lingering image of the sinful city. In Handberg's analysis the forward-looking Montreal Expo held in 1967, with its manifestations of modernity and progress, becomes the sounding board for how the circulation of modernist second-hand furniture today provides a way to look back in time to form an understanding and a statement of the present. A second scene, explored by the author, contributing to the renegotiation of the city's cultural past and identity, concerns kitsch objects. In contrast to the global modernist style of furniture, this scene has historical roots being embedded in notions of Quebecity featuring aesthetic expressions of *québécoise*. In some contexts, *québécoise* signifies provincialism and backwardness, but by dint of a double negation the knowing consumer transforms the 'local tradition' of bad taste into an ironic connoisseurship that knows how to appreciate second-hand kitsch objects.

Placemaking is also an important feature in Hansson's and Brembeck's work. This contribution deals with the complex layers of circulation, of stuff, of people and of affects that tie together a specific second-hand market. Kommersen is a popular flea market in Gothenburg, Sweden, which the authors analyse from a circulatory perspective, suggesting that the flea market provides researchers with a unique lens for observing market and consumer practices 'in the wild', in contrast to formalized settings. A distinguishing feature of flea markets, compared to conventional stores, is that they combine retail display features from eras both

prior and subsequent to the introduction of open display practices. Circulatory flows of the market are dynamically managed and amplified through the physical layout of the premises, through display techniques, and through the sensory dimensions of the setting. These material and immaterial circulations at the flea market, Hansson and Brembeck argue, generate particular subjectivities, affects and atmospheres. Using actor-network theory, they show how a flea market such as Kommersen comprises many different networks, each with their own logic of circulation. Such networks of circulation, of social and material things, may seem local, but in fact are far wider, both geographically and chronologically.

The agency emerging in aging objects is brought forward by Octave Debary. This contribution circles around a project based on an experimental method of inviting people to become engaged in 'photographic and narrative work' to explore the relationship between objects and memory. This project resulted in a book and an exhibition that is discussed in Debary's article. The focus is on the awakening occurring when dormant old objects are encountered by visitors to French yard sales, or *vide-greniers*. What is the peculiar power of the aging object to captivate and inspire the passing subject into action? New meetings between things and people are instigated, but that can only happen after a parting. Parting with an object is more an act of mourning than a matter of making money. With no set prices the *vide-greniers* open up a space for negotiation between seller and buyer that turns this commodity exchange into a social exchange. The sociality of the *vide-greniers* is further explored by Debary through asking new owners of old objects to pose with their finds as two actors in front of the camera, and through written expressions of the kind of imagined memories the objects conjure up.

Revisiting the long history within social anthropology of studying the mutual entanglement of material objects and human subjects, the contribution by Staffan Appelgren and Anna Bohlin applies classic anthropological perspectives on circulation to the field of second-hand practices. In this largely theoretical piece, growth emerges as a metaphorical and theoretical concept for understanding the transformations that objects in circulation undergo. Similar to the growth of organisms, circulating second-hand things are produced through a combination of qualities and forces both internal and external to the objects. Unlike first cycle commodities, purified of their sociality, what emerges from such circulation is a category of things that combine elements of both classic commodities and gifts, as they have been theorised within anthropology. Moving beyond the notion that things have social biographies, such a conceptualisation of second-hand objects allows for an appreciation of their agential capacities; how these are produced by their circulation, but also affecting it.

Whether perceived as a remedy to constraints and costs associated with linear forms of first cycle production and consumption, or as a means to cope with the excess of stuff confronting affluent people in contemporary consumer societies, circulation is about passing things on, but also about their returns. In various

ways, the contributions to this thematic issue highlight how these returns often are disordered and serendipitous, but increasingly desired and sought after. Things, people, sites, affects, transactions all form part of the second-hand markets where such returns are made socially and commercially valuable. This complex and fascinating field caters to many needs and desires, ranging from caring for the environment and handling overflow to decorating homes and bodies and preserving old things. We hope that this thematic issue can cast some light on these complexities, and that it will stimulate further engagement with a topic that is likely to increase in societal and scholarly significance.

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## Notes

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